

# AdAge

## HOW THE PANDEMIC RESHAPED CONSUMERS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH FOOD

Attention has shifted from chicken sandwich wars to prices and health, a new survey reveals

By [Jon Springer](#). Published on December 15, 2021.



Messages and news about food are now more likely to elicit a behavioral response from consumers, according to a forthcoming study from Hunter, a consumer marketing and communications firm.

Consumers are now devoting considerably more attention to food than they had prior to the pandemic, according to the Stagwell agency's 2021 News Study, shared exclusively with Ad Age. Hunter found that more people consider themselves “foodies” who are deeply affected by headlines and food's impact on society. The changing perceptions could be meaningful for

brands in the food space, given consumers' increased propensity to adjust their consumption habits based on what they read.

For many consumer groups, food also gained personal relevance compared to news on other topics. This is most evident among baby boomers, with 72% saying they recognize the importance of news about food, up from 69% before the pandemic in 2019. Hispanic consumers showed an even greater increase, growing from 52% in 2019 to 71% today, the study found.

The pandemic's stay-at-home mandates reintroduced millions of consumers to home-meal consumption, home cooking, their neighborhood grocery stores and focused a spotlight on consumer health. These changes are proving to be resilient even as COVID restrictions have eased, Hunter researchers said.

Food safety, and its relationship to health and wellness, is considered the most important topic to consumers who participated in the study. This represents a sharp contrast from 2019, when the top story in the industry was the fast-food chicken sandwich wars. Restaurant mask mandates, food price inflation and the Tyson chicken recall also surpassed chicken sandwich news in this year's findings.

Food inflation news was the most influential story of the year, with 22% of consumers saying they would change their behavior because of it. Restaurant mask mandates (20%) and the chicken recall (14%) followed.

Readers are still interested in lighter news about the food industry. The popularity of air fryers in home kitchens ranked as the fifth most-important development among those polled, changing the behaviors of nearly 1 in every 10 readers. And one of the most attention-getting stories this year was Lady Gaga's partnership with Oreo cookies. Celebrity-endorsed fast-food orders also ranked among the year's most impactful food developments, consumers said.

Millennials, according to Hunter's findings, are the most likely consumer cohort to change their shopping and eating habits based on the news flow.

That food consumers increasingly see themselves as “foodies” “is one of the most fascinating findings in this year’s study,” Hedy DeMaria, chief insights and strategy officer at Hunter, said in a press release.

“Based on last year’s reports, we were expecting to find consumers continuing to increase the amount they cook, as well as improving their enjoyment and confidence with cooking, but this year’s study also uncovered a more lasting impact from the pandemic—it is reshaping consumers’ priorities with regards to food. A greater portion of Americans consider food quality and discovery the most important factors defining their relationship with food and many are less concerned with convenience. These are fundamental changes we expect to continue long after the pandemic ends.”

The survey polled 1,002 U.S. consumers between Oct. 15 and Oct. 21. It was Hunter's first published food news survey since 2019; last year, the company eschewed its annual report in favor of separate studies assessing the effects of the pandemic on consumers.